

## PROFILE

- 52
- Female
- American
- Buddhist
- Brought up as Christian
- Law School Graduate
- Legal assistant
- Practice of meditation: 9 years

### **Why did I start meditating?**

I had my first experience with meditation when I sought help from Alcoholics Anonymous twenty-two years ago. AA teaches an open kind of meditation which is somewhat devotional. It not only helped me to remain sober ever since, but it also spurred me on to explore more traditional forms of practice. For many years I tried out all sorts of Christian and Buddhist meditation techniques. I found that those practices calmed my mind and helped me to become more aware of what I was thinking. About nine years ago, I started a more or less regular practice, and for the past five years I have been a serious practitioner of Vipassanā or mindfulness meditation.

### **Has my life changed as a result of meditation?**

Sometimes it does not feel that I am making much progress at all.

It seems that I have actually more attitudes and behaviors that cause problems. But when I reflect on this I realize that probably there may not have been an increase of such attitudes or problems, but rather that I have become more aware of them. Someone once told me that according to the Dalai Lama we should only assess our progress in five year intervals. Viewed from such a perspective I have definitely made some progress and my life has changed for the better.

One of the biggest changes has been that I now have an interest in the whole of the Buddha's teachings and specifically in the Noble Eightfold Path. When I first started meditating I had no interest in any teachings; I was only interested in having calm and peaceful feelings and in getting those exotic experiences which I thought would happen during meditation. I also hoped to become wise instantly and to become an outstanding individual. Slowly, I began to realize that meditation was part of a greater whole of the Buddha's teachings, and that the point of the practice was to wake up to a greater reality. I especially liked the Buddha's encouragement to 'come and see for yourself'. He pointed out that you will only be able to understand his teachings to the extent that you have truly understood them yourself. I have therefore become very interested in verifying his fundamental doctrines by carefully observing my own experiences.

I now understand that it is silly to blame other people for the way I feel and react. Other people are not responsible for my happiness or unhappiness, and I am not responsible for other people's happiness or unhappiness. This of course also means that other people cannot take away my happiness, joy, or peace. I am responsible for all of my states of mind. I have therefore

been putting more and more efforts into observing what I think, say, and do. This way I have been able to clearly see the consequences of all my actions and I have become more aware of my behavior patterns. The problems are in the mind and the solutions are in the mind too. I do not really have to make an effort to change, all I need to do is to be always mindful of what is going on in my mind and this enables me to make the right decisions under the circumstances. Understanding all this has also made me more patient towards myself and others, and I have become happier and more at peace with myself.

Here is an example to illustrate how mindfulness meditation works: I was doing a long self-retreat in a trailer which at the time was infested with small moth-like insects. They seemed to hatch daily and clearing them out therefore became a daily chore. At the beginning I simply vacuumed them up, often several times a day. However, after doing this for a couple of weeks, I one day felt it was not right to destroy them and I began to capture the little insects one by one in a glass jar and then release them outside. I did not think much of it at the time until – when I came out of the retreat – a friend asked me whether I had had any exciting experiences or any insights. I felt rather embarrassed by her question and told her that I felt I had not gotten anything from the retreat in that respect. But then I remembered those little moths and said to her: “Well, there is one thing that has changed. I found out that I can no longer intentionally kill insects.” I cannot really say what shifted in me, but I have tried to avoid killing any kind of creature ever since.

## PROFILE

- 35
- Female
- Korean
- Buddhist
- BA in Sociology
- English and Social Studies teacher
- Practice of meditation: first retreat 3 years ago, regular practice for the past 1½ years

### **Why did I start meditating?**

Ever since I was a child I felt quite a lot of discontent with my life and somehow rejected by society. During my studies at university I read several books about spirituality, among them the Christian Bible. I found a lot of them very inspiring, they gave me hope, and I changed many of my views about myself and the world. As a result I become quite content and happy, and I found it much easier to get on with other people.

When I was 28 I went through a crisis, a kind of depression. I felt I was leading a very superficial life, that there was no real meaning in life at all. I also remembered that when I was 18 I had felt this strong urge to enter a monastery, become a nun, and practise meditation. This idea had somehow stayed with me, but I still felt I was not ready to follow that calling. Instead, I took up Korean yoga which I hoped would prepare me for that kind of life.

Things turned out very differently. I fell in love with a Westerner who worked at the same school, and about a year later we got married. However, I kept my interest in spirituality, particularly in meditation, and one year into my marriage I went on a three week intensive Vipassanā retreat. It was almost entirely in silence, we had to keep to a very tough time-table, move very slowly, and silently label whatever we did and experienced throughout the day. All this made me feel more and more tense, and convinced me that I was still not ready for meditation. I was also unable to apply this technique at home and – rather disappointed – gave up on it for the time being.

The following year, a Burmese meditation teacher came to Korea to lead a ten-day retreat. I had heard that he was different from other Sayadaws, and that the method he taught emphasised the observation of the mind (*cittānupassanā*). I immediately signed up for the retreat. I had heard some really positive reports about the teacher and was therefore very excited to meet him.

The retreat turned out to be a real eye-opener for me. During a Dhamma discussion I asked the teacher to explain the meaning of mindfulness. He told us that we basically just need to remind ourselves to be aware of the present moment, of whatever we are doing right now. He also stressed that we need to periodically check our attitude, i.e. that it was important to meditate with a mind as free as possible from any kind of desire or aversion.

I followed his advice and soon discovered that I had plenty of wrong attitudes. I had a strong desire to meditate well (whatever that means), I was very eager for good results and therefore I was always agitated, and I focused too much – trying hard to

see what was happening – which of course made me very tense. I learned to practise in a more relaxed and receptive way and soon was able to notice many bodily sensations and mental feelings. I realized that there is no need to look for things, that all I need to do is see what is already there. At the end of the retreat I even experienced the observing mind, i.e. on a few occasions I knew that I was aware.

### **How has meditation changed my life?**

I was very happy to have found such a good teacher and a meditation method which suited me so well. I started a regular practice at home, sitting one hour every day, but I found it very difficult to practise in daily life, i.e. to apply the practice of mindfulness to all daily activities. I had very high expectations and wanted my mindfulness to be perfect all day, but it was far from continuous and I felt that my level of mindfulness was quite low. I told a good friend of mine – who had been practising the same method for some time – about my difficulties. She explained to me that I was trying too hard, that I needed to let go of my expectations, to accept whatever level of mindfulness I had, and to be content to simply practise ‘as much as you can’.

That turned out to be very good advice. I practised as much as I could without pushing myself, and slowly began to better understand how the mind works. I noticed my anger and also observed other people’s anger. I realized that we are all responsible for own anger, that it is our own internal reaction to external stimulus that makes us angry. I learned to just observe feelings and emotions instead of getting absorbed in them. Also, instead of becoming upset when others happened to be very angry, I felt

sorry for them since I now saw that they were actually suffering a lot. As a result I changed my behaviour towards them; instead of reacting negatively I tried my best to be nice to them. This usually diffused the situation, and my relationships with family, friends, and colleagues became more and more harmonious.

I became less judgemental of my students and learned to be more patient with them. I also discovered that I had a lot of wrong views – particularly about the foreign teachers at our school – and I became more open-minded and tolerant. The practice of mindfulness made me feel much more alive, I felt much more content, and my life felt more fulfilled.

However, I also felt a great desire to really deepen my practice and – after talking it over with my husband – I decided to go to Myanmar for nine months. I wanted to learn how to meditate in the right way at my teacher's monastery. I have been here for over six months and have been able to learn quite a lot. I am now able to meditate in a more relaxed way, without pushing, and with much less greed in my mind. There is less identification with mind activities such as thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and I have become considerably less attached to people. I can much more easily (and more often) accept things as they are, and I therefore experience a lot more freedom than ever before in my life. My mindfulness has become more continuous, and this ability to stay in the present moment makes me feel happier, more at ease, more balanced, and more content.

## PROFILE

- 36
- Female
- Singaporean
- Buddhist
- Degree in Accountancy
- Accountant
- Practice of meditation: 11 years

### **Why did I start meditating?**

**M**y father suddenly and very unexpectedly passed away when I was 16. I was in a state of shock. My brother comforted me: “Don’t be sad, everybody dies one day anyway.” That somehow sucked the hysteria out of me and I felt lighter and empty. I did not cry anymore over my father’s death. A few days later I decided to try meditation and asked my mother to give me some basic instructions. However, I was unable to concentrate my mind on the breath, my mind was all over the place and I felt very restless. I literally gave up after a few minutes only and did not try to meditate again for years.

Seven years later I was going through a depression. I had been working for three years by then, the job was getting more and more stressful, and I could not see any meaning in life. Whenever I thought of the future, all I could see was waking up,



eating, going to work, coming home, eating, going to sleep, waking up... I felt like life had no meaning, I felt like an empty shell, and this feeling even stayed with me when I was out partying, meeting friends, and trying to have fun.

Around this time my mother went to Burma to meditate. She wrote letters from the meditation centre telling me how inspired she was and how great it would be if I could join her. She was planning to stay there for one year, and so I decided to take one month leave to go and see her and to try out meditation.

My mother got me started on the day I arrived. She sat me down in the meditation hall and told me how to watch the rising and falling of my abdomen while silently labelling it. I sat for an entire hour just doing that and without my mind going anywhere – I was amazed. The following day she taught me walking meditation and watching sensations – this too felt very natural. I was surprised but of course very pleased that I took to meditation so easily.

A week later I heard a Dhamma talk about the four woeful states (i.e. the lower realms of being) and how to avoid getting reborn into them. As a concluding sentence, the Bhikkhu told us not to give up until we had reached the end of the road. This talk very deeply resonated with me, somehow I felt I really understood the hell-realms he was talking about and I also really wanted to be free. I had been searching for something meaningful in life all those years and I felt that this was it.

### **How has meditation changed my life?**

One year later I quit my job to go to Burma with the intention to just meditate for the next two years. I began an intensive medita-

tion retreat which I found very difficult at first. However, after about two months of intensive effort, things began flowing along naturally and I suddenly made rapid progress. One day I was told that I had made it. In not so many words, but with many oblique references, I was given to understand that I had reached the first stage of enlightenment. I was told that I now knew how to meditate and did not need to practise intensively anymore. I was told by other yogis that this meant I could no longer fall back into lower existences, and that final Nibbāna was guaranteed within seven more life-times at the most. Of course that stopped me from continuing to make an earnest effort. I began to socialise and go out of the meditation centre to run errands for the meditation teacher.

I felt a need to expand my horizon and went to another meditation centre, where I was mostly meditating on my own. After a few weeks I went to talk to one of the teachers since I wanted some feedback on my 'attainment'. I told him about my meditation experiences, but instead of reassuring me he scoffed at what I told him, saying that I had simply been asleep while meditating. That really started me thinking. I went back to my first teacher to ask him about it. He was convinced that I had had a valid experience, that I had not been sleeping, and he told me to keep meditating.

My dilemma finally ended when I went to see a very old teacher on the recommendation of a Vietnamese friend. I told him very candidly about my experiences and doubts. He smiled and then gave me a very clear explanation of the nature of enlightenment and the qualities of true understanding. This really clarified my thinking. It was obvious that I was not enlightened

after all, and it was actually a big relief to no longer constantly be wondering whether I was or not!

After one year in Burma I returned to Singapore for a visit. My Vietnamese friend had very strongly advised me to go practise with the old Burmese teacher and a month later I returned to Burma and did just that. When I went for my first interview, there was an assistant with the old teacher who was doing all the talking. Through an interpreter he asked my Vietnamese friend: "How does the mind feel when there is pain?" Since I had always had problems in dealing with pain during meditation, I was very interested in this topic. In fact I hated having to watch pain. The assistant teacher explained to my friend that it was better not to look at pain directly and advised her not to label it "pain". He also talked about intelligent ways to understand and to deal with pain. I was fascinated; it made so much sense to me.

I decided to stay and practise under the guidance of this assistant teacher. One of the first things he told me was that I had meditation "fall-out". I didn't realise it, but I was always sleeping during sitting meditation. I found out about this when, one day, he asked me: "How was your three o'clock sit?" I said it was fine. "No," he replied, "it was not fine at all." He told me I had been rocking forward and backward like a boat on the open sea and I had obviously not even been aware of it. This was the beginning of a rather long ordeal to get me out of this habit which I would get into almost as soon as I sat down and closed my eyes. The teacher very patiently advised me how to proceed and also gave me many useful suggestions on how to get my mind to work more effectively.

Two significant events really made me see what meditation does for me. I continued to practise, but for many months I felt I was not as “dedicated” to the practice as other people. One day, the teacher was commenting on another yogi’s anger and her unwillingness to work with it. This yogi would go for long walks every time she got angry, and she was dismayed that she had so much anger. She even felt like crushing ants with her fingers. It was very distressing for her because she had never experienced such violent feelings in her life. In her past practices, she had developed strong concentration and had therefore felt peaceful and calm. The teacher explained to her that she had always had anger but that she had never been aware of it. We live such busy lives that we are always able to distract ourselves from anger and so never acknowledge it.

This yogi was not only confronted with all her anger, she was also identifying with the anger, taking it personally, instead of accepting it as a universal quality which affects every human being given certain conditions. I suddenly realised that I had been avoiding the anger I had been feeling by talking to my friends about it in order to make myself feel better. I slowly began to acknowledge my anger instead of talking about it. I saw how ugly it felt, a very uncomfortable feeling that the heart did not really want to be with. Now I realised that I needed to work with it and that avoiding it was not the answer.

The second significant experience happened about seven months after I had begun practising with this new teacher. Some other yogis and I went with the teacher to practise at another centre. The hosts were very pious and strict and therefore critical of yogi behaviour. So we all fell into line and practised very seri-

ously. I began to experience some of the things that the teacher had mentioned before – thoughts were beginning to “pop” off the moment they were recognised, it felt like they were being shot at with a gun! About this time, I had a serious conflict with a close family member. Strong feelings of resentment and sadness came up, and as I was doing walking meditation it occurred to me that I needed to watch these feelings directly. I decided to sit down on a rattan chair nearby and observe the feelings. My memory of this is still very vivid. I closed my eyes and acknowledged the feelings. It felt like I had just been with them for eight heartbeats when they slowly faded away in my mind – like some air was getting sucked out of a space. As soon as these feelings of heaviness were gone there was a rush of pure joy!! It was absolutely amazing!

The mind looked at the joy and understood a few things: 1. Just as the teacher had said, when anger is watched and completely clears out of the mind, what is left behind is complete clarity. The change from anger is like from black to white – unimaginable, but now I had experienced it first hand! 2. It was irrelevant how the person whom I was blaming for my resentment and sadness was feeling. I had wrongly been thinking that I had to feel sad every time my relative felt sad, but now the mind realised that she was in the kitchen right at that moment, still feeling sad, whereas here I was, feeling joy! 3. Thinking that someone else could make me feel sad was wrong. What I feel is actually under my own control if I know how to look after my own mind. So no one can be made responsible for what I am feeling, it is only an expression of my inability to look after my mind when I feel bad.

These two significant experiences, which happened within a period of a few months, changed my faith in meditation. It was no longer about believing and feeling inspired – now I knew it was real! I still cannot say that I practise with the sort of seriousness that I see in other people, but I feel that the process of self-examination has never stopped since. The realisation that all of my experience is a reflection of my mind has spurred me on to keep practising – a never-ending process.

A few years later another Dhamma teacher became significant in my life. He gives talks which are very much in tune with what my teacher says. Although I have never gone on a retreat with him, all his Dhamma talks inspire me and give me new ways of understanding. Sometimes they reinforce or clarify things I have already understood, other times they open up new views and understandings. My view of meditation has substantially changed over the past eleven years, and I feel very grateful to everyone who has helped me on this journey. I certainly feel like I am a very different person from when I began meditating. I feel nothing else would have been more worth doing than this. Regardless of what work I am engaged in I can always apply whatever I have learned because meditation is not an exclusive activity. It is an inclusive activity. With the right understanding, everything is meditation.

## PROFILE

- 44
- Female
- Vietnamese
- Buddhist
- PhD in Buddhist Studies
- Nun
- Practice of meditation: took first steps over 20 years ago, regular and intensive practice for past 1 ½ years only

### **Why did I start meditating?**

I was born into a Buddhist family but since we were not very religious we never visited monasteries and I did not learn much about Buddhism when I was a child. My brother's sudden death when I was 19 made me change my life drastically. I left home and got ordained as a nun in the tradition of the Mendicant Buddhist School of Vietnam. Six years later, after finishing my studies in Vietnam, I still felt a need for deeper understandings and so I went to India for higher education.

Doing so much study, however, makes the mind very complicated and I often found communication with people difficult. I am also rather headstrong and therefore tend to overreact when things do not work out. My inflexibility and stubbornness made it difficult for me to make friends and I therefore at times felt

lonely. Every now and then, when things got very bad, I would take a break from my studies, relax and travel for a few days.

During one of these breaks I went on an intensive meditation retreat. At first we concentrated on the breath, and then the method focused on the direct experience of bodily sensations. In a way this helped me to relax and get in touch with the body, but the mind did not remain equanimous when experiencing all these diverse sensations. I was also very much aware that I was not learning how to handle difficult emotions and that the method did not help me to purify the mind or to make it more flexible. I left the retreat in a kind of happy and relaxed frame of mind, but at the same time I knew that it was not the right kind of meditation for me.

### **Has meditation changed my life?**

At the end of the semester I took a year off from my studies in order to practise meditation intensively. I wanted to find a method that would help me to become more open minded and teach me how to deal with difficult mind states. First I went to Thailand and later to Myanmar where – by chance – I happened to find a meditation centre that teaches satipatthāna with an emphasis on observation of the mind (cittānupassanā). When I arrived I did not know anybody and the teacher had gone abroad for several months. They gave me a room and their booklet on meditation. A nun told me that it was very important to practise under a teacher and advised me to go to another centre where I would be able to get personal instruction and guidance from a mediation master.

The following day I read the booklet. I was surprised by its straightforward wisdom. The more I read the clearer it became



that I had found the right method and I decided to stay and wait for the teacher's return. I spent a whole week reading and studying the booklet. Only when I felt I had sufficiently understood it, I went to practise in the meditation hall. To be honest, I think it is not easy for a beginner to practise cittānupassanā without personal guidance from an experienced teacher. It is easy to become disheartened by the many difficulties one is likely to face and – if you are not patient – to fall back to your former practice to some extent. However, I felt so certain that this was the right method for me that I decided to stay, face any difficulties and wait for the teacher to return.

I have now been practising cittānupassanā for more than eight months. Both body and mind have become much more relaxed, and the quality of mind has improved considerably. Applying the teacher's advice to 'relax', 'accept', and 'be mindful with understanding' has given me the confidence to face even the most difficult mind states. The way I live and the way I think have become simpler day by day, and life has become so much more meaningful. The longer I practise the more I realize that being attached to things I thought I could not live without has actually been causing me a lot of suffering.

It is, however, not at all easy to watch the mind. I have, for example, sometimes done things which I thought would benefit both others and myself. On closer examination though, I discovered that I had actually done them from a standpoint of superiority, with a proud and conceited mind. The mind can be very complex, deceptive, and cunning. Now I know that nobody makes me suffer. I understand that the mind is chiefly responsible for causing problems. I realized that the mind creates stories,

talks, judges and makes things worse by blowing them out of proportion. I suffer if I allow myself to get involved in the stories which the mind creates, but if I can distance myself and listen to the calm and reasonable parts of the mind I can let go and be at peace.

This practice needs a lot of patience, it is a life-long undertaking. Another important thing I recognized during my practice is just how important it is to be honest and sincere. I need to be always prepared to accept and learn from my mistakes. Being sincere in whatever I do and strictly following the moral precepts will help me make further progress.

Mindfulness meditation has had a great impact on my life. I am grateful to all the people who have helped me in some way to find this particular practice. I am especially grateful to my teacher. Without him, without his clear guidance in the practice of satipatthāna, my life would be rather dull and insipid.

## PROFILE

- 42
- Male
- Malaysian
- Buddhist
- Consultant
- Practice of meditation: 5 years

### **What did I start meditating?**

I had been seeking answers to the meaning of life for many years because I found life tough and disappointing. I started practising Buddhist meditation simply because I wanted to have a healthier body and a healthier mind. It was only after getting to know more about the Dhamma that I realized that meditation can do more than that – it can lead us to total freedom from our suffering and to the attainment of perfect happiness.

I became particularly interested in Vipassanā meditation. I read books about it and I became really inspired after watching a documentary on how Vipassanā meditation transformed the lives of prison inmates in India. Once I had understood the immense benefits of this meditation technique, I decided to try it out for myself. I decided to practise a form of Vipassanā which puts the emphasis on observing the contents and workings of the mind (cittānupassanā).

## **Has meditation changed my life?**

Absolutely, my life has not been the same since I began to practise Buddhist meditation. Day by day I have been gaining deeper and deeper understandings about myself and about the world around me. These understandings have helped me to live my life in a meaningful way and encourage me to keep striving toward total freedom from suffering, toward the attainment of enlightenment.

Recently I took two months leave in order to intensify and deepen my practice at a meditation centre that emphasizes observing the mind. It has been a period of purification and of increase in wisdom. My encounters with other people have become more harmonious and I have become more at peace with myself. I have learned how important ethics or moral discipline is for the meditative practice, how important it is to be continuously aware throughout the day so that the mind becomes calm and stable, and also how vital it is that we apply and increase our knowledge and wisdom. In this meditation practice we try to apply all the aspects of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path to our lives.

What I find so fascinating about *cittānupassanā* is the fact that it can be practised anywhere, anytime, by anyone – no matter what age or background. It enables you to recognize and deal with the defilements, all the different manifestations of greed, hatred and delusion. It helps you to really understand the mind – and the world – at deeper and deeper levels.

## PROFILE

- 37
- Female
- Chinese Malaysian
- Buddhist
- BA in Communication
- Yoga Instructor
- Meditation experience: 3 years

### **Why did I start meditating?**

I suppose it all started with me wondering why the mind fluctuates so regularly and sometimes so strongly – one moment feeling good, the next feeling lousy. It feels like the mind is helplessly exposed to sun, rain, and thunderstorms. When still working in advertising I started practising yoga, which I felt was good both for calming the mind and the body. Later, I connected to a group which was practising Dhamma in a Tibetan tradition. I read books on Buddhism, went to Dhamma talks, made friends with other practitioners, and got to know some spiritual teachers. I participated in chantings, visualizations and rituals and I also began a regular meditation practice. However, all these activities did not really help me understand the nature of the mind.

## **Has meditation changed my life?**

I made a major life change about two years ago when I decided to give up my job in advertising and become a yoga instructor. I went to India to undergo a year-long training. Yoga is a mindfulness practice in itself. We also did regular meditation practices, but I still felt there was something missing. Then, back in Malaysia, a friend told me about Vipassanā meditation. I decided to try it out and went on a weekend workshop. It felt like coming home. This was it, the method that would help me to better understand 'my' nature.

On the recommendation of my first Vipassanā teacher I went on a two-month long retreat in Myanmar. The centre I went to emphasizes observing the mind rather than focussing on body and feelings – like many other methods do. This method of watching the mind is utterly practical and sensible. You do not just sit on the cushion to practise. You practise anytime and everywhere. It helps you to effectively guard body, speech, and mind. You became aware of everything you do, say, and think. It helps you to better understand what is going on by quietly investigating: 'Why do I say what I say?', 'Why do I do what I do?', 'Why do I feel this way?', 'What is my intention?', 'Why do I behave this way?'.

Simply by continuously observing all my actions and thoughts I understand myself better and behave more wisely. Calm observation of what is going on creates a space to reflect and to make sensible decisions. It helps me to understand the nature of my mind better and better. All this makes me more and more sensitive to all my feelings and intentions.

Observing the mind intelligently is a self-cleansing process in more than one way. When, for example, aversion arises and I

calmly look at it, the aversion not only will disappear or at least diminish, but I will also understand that the problem is not the aversion but the 'self'. In other words, the problem is the 'I' that identified with whatever was happening and therefore actually gave rise to the aversion.

Understanding this helps me to let go, and this gives me a feeling of lightness and delight. It makes me realize that it is plain silly to identify and hold on to any emotions of anger or greed. Any manifestations of greed or anger simply occur because of conditions.

Continuous awareness throughout the day makes the mind calm, stable and alert. This gives me a sense of freedom; I am no longer the slave of emotions and I have – at least to some extent – the feeling of being in control. This does not mean that I am actively controlling things but rather, by making the constant effort to remind myself to be aware, I create a space in which the mind can make wise decisions. All this of course can only happen if I really accept things as they are, i.e. if I am absolutely honest with myself, accept my shortcomings and mistakes, and if I am willing to learn from them.

Every moment is a new moment, and we can learn from every new experience. I realized that I need to be interested in what is happening right here and now in order to continue to understand and learn. I am convinced that this is the best way forward for me to improve the quality of the mind, to make it healthier and saner. Even though this process has been very painful at times (looking at any form of greed or anger is no fun), it has also been very rewarding. Whenever there are no negative mental states, positive ones will automatically come in – so in a

way the mind purifies itself. When the mind is positive it is usually also still and simple and this is very energizing. When – on the contrary – I am suffering from negative mental states, the mind is very busy, I feel exhausted, and my energies get burnt up quickly.

Mindfulness meditation has helped me to much better understand the mind. Observing the mind moment to moment and accepting whatever is happening eventually makes it peaceful and calm. When the mind no longer occupies itself with incessant and useless thoughts it becomes very still and content. Perhaps the most amazing discovery so far for me has been that there is a quiet happiness in this contentment, a happiness that lasts, that is much deeper than the kind of happiness you can get from indulging in any kind of sensual pleasures.

I used to think that laughter was the best medicine, but now I realize that laughter with understanding is even better medicine.



## PROFILE

- 34
- Female
- Burmese
- PhD in Oriental Studies
- ex-University assistant lecturer
- Buddhist Nun

### **Why did I start meditating?**

I took my first steps in the practice of Dhamma when I was only 8 years old, shortly after my father had passed away. My mother and my grandparents taught me mindfulness of breathing, and later that year they sent me to a monastery for three months. I became a temporary nun and learned to chant protective verses and several key Buddhist texts. At thirteen I went to a meditation centre to deepen my meditation. However, I did not really understand the importance of meditation at the time. I was much more interested in learning more about the Buddhist scriptures and in understanding the Buddha's teachings. Therefore I regularly went to listen to Dhamma talks given by many renowned teachers. At twenty-three I read a book by the well-known Sayadaw U Jotika. It so inspired me that I felt a strong aspiration to earnestly pursue the practice of mindfulness medi-

tation. I felt a very strong desire to overcome attachment and aversion, and also to develop a deeper sense of gratitude.

### **Has meditation changed my life?**

Whenever I could take time off from my teaching responsibilities and my studies I went on meditation retreat. I visited many different centres and deepened my understanding by receiving guidance from several well-known meditation masters. My interest in meditation had shifted to the practice of mindfulness meditation or satipatthāna. I also took up the study of the processes and characteristics of the mind (abhidhamma) which I found very helpful in understanding my meditation experience.

Mindfulness meditation not only helps you understand your current experiences and mind states, it also helps you digest and understand experiences from the past. In my case I had a lot of childhood memories coming up which wanted looking at. When I was a child we used to move very frequently. I often had hardly enough time to get used to my new surroundings and make new friends, before we moved to yet another town. Since I was a very sensitive child and quickly became attached to things and people, I suffered a lot. I particularly liked trees and consequently suffered a great deal when I had to leave them behind. I therefore started to withdraw and no longer connected with people that much anymore, and I even stopped growing plants. Whenever I met new people I told myself that they were already dead, i.e. I prepared myself for the inevitable parting.

In October 2005 my blood-pressure suddenly shot up and before I could do something about it I suffered a minor stroke. I was partially paralyzed and suffered from a lot of pain. I thought

I was going to die. During recovery I not only realized that I had indeed come close to death but also that life was a very precious opportunity to improve one's mind. I understood that while all the study I had done was very helpful in many ways, it had not really had a great impact on liberating the mind, in freeing it from greed, hatred, and delusion.

I started thinking about changing my life when, only about half a year later, my mother died. Again I had lost someone whom I was very much attached to. Again I saw how attachment leads to grief and lamentation. It was a kind of wake-up call: 'Time to think more deeply about life!' Two weeks after her death I listened to a Dhamma talk titled: 'Being so tired'. The timing was right and the message really sunk in. I decided to give up my teaching career, become a nun, and to devote the rest of my life to the practice of Dhamma, i.e. to invest all my energies into deepening my meditation in order to purify the mind as fully as possible.

## PROFILE

- 49
- Male
- Swiss
- Buddhist
- Religion by birth: Protestant Christian
- BA in translation
- Started meditating at 30,
- Regular, partly very intensive practice for the past 13 years

### **Why did I start meditating?**

I met my first Buddhist and meditation teacher, the late Venerable U Nyanika, when I was staying at the Burmese temple in Sarnath, India, in February 1987. I had been living and travelling in Austral-Asia for over 6 years and was planning to return to Europe. By that time I had actually become travel-weary and so I eagerly accepted U Nyanika's invitation to visit him in London, where he would teach me meditation. I had lived over three years in Japan where I had read a lot about Buddhism – and once I had also tried Zen meditation – but it was only now that I felt ready to explore it. My main motivation to travel and live abroad had been a quest for freedom and a sense of curiosity. I found out, however, that travelling is just another lifestyle, that even with all the time in the world to eat, drink, smoke, meet people, sight-see, take drugs, and have sex, there is always a limit to how

much you can consume or do. In a way, the world had been my playground and I was getting tired of it. I realized that all I was going to get was more of the same and that it was never going to be enough, that this ever-present thirst for pleasant sensual experiences was a kind of prison. Life seemed a bit like an endless cycle of ups and downs. Meditation promised a new field of exploration, a new world, and so once again I was motivated by a quest for freedom and a sense of curiosity to explore new territory.

### **Has mindfulness meditation changed my life?**

I was not really trying to change at all. Change happened naturally and gradually. After my first retreat with U Nyanika at the London Burmese Vihara I simply started a daily meditation practice. Usually I would sit once in the morning and once in the evening and also do some walking meditation. Occasionally I would do a whole day of intensive meditation, but there were also periods when I would not do any formal meditation for weeks. I also tried to remain mindful throughout the day; I practiced mindfulness meditation as expounded in the Satipatthāna Sutta. Slowly I became more and more clearly aware of my actions and my mind states. I began to see how adversely alcohol and marijuana consumption affected my mind, particularly my ability to concentrate, to keep the mind stable. The effect of alcohol seemed to wear off within a day or two, but even just the occasional few puffs of marijuana had a much longer lasting effect. It would take me about two weeks until I could experience the usual calmness and stability of mind while meditating.

Increased awareness also made me take a closer look at a lot of other habits: the food I ate, the people I associated with, my

relationships with women, the movies I watched, what I did for a living, the way I spent my free time, etcetera. After about a year of meditation I made my first life-changing decision. It had become clear to me that the cultivation of the mind was a never-ending process and that in some way I wanted to make this the main objective of my life. Consequently, I decided not to marry and not to have children. This decision was supported by my then girlfriend who at that time also had similar aspirations. Two years later I decided to quit my job as a travel agent and to study for a degree in translation. So at the ripe age of 33 I embarked on a full-time university course.

Half-way through those four-and-a-half years I made further lifestyle changes. By that time I had become so aware and sensitive to what I was eating and drinking that I felt I needed to change my habits and commit myself to a healthier way of living. I had particularly become fed up with smoking; I had been smoking a packet or more a day for over ten years. To be a slave to some dried leaves wrapped up in thin paper had started looking really ridiculous – not to mention the obvious harm that inhaling was doing to my body. I had tried to reduce my consumption but that never worked for long. So I decided to make a few changes all at the same time: I became a vegetarian and I gave up smoking and drinking. It was surprisingly easy. I was so determined to make these changes that I managed to completely give up smoking and drinking from one day to the next. Actually, it was not so much a giving up than a letting go, and I have been a happy non-smoking teetotaler ever since.

These changes were of course not only the result of practising mindfulness but also the result of trying to keep the five basic

precepts of Buddhism. Keeping those precepts in turn helped me in my meditation since only a calm and peaceful mind is able to concentrate and understand what is actually going on. I therefore realized just how important it is to become ethically more sensitive in order to keep making progress in meditation. The practice of ethics also gives you a strong and natural self confidence.

During the latter part of my degree course I had to study abroad. I spent two trimesters at a university in England. During this time I also got involved with a very active Buddhist organisation which draws its teachings and inspirations mainly from Tibetan sources. Since I had been practising on my own for many years, it felt really exhilarating to connect to such a positive and like-minded group of people, and I began to understand the importance of spiritual friendship. After my return to Switzerland I intensified my practice and – as several people had asked me for guidance – I also started teaching basic Buddhism and meditation. Over the next few years I regularly went on meditation and study retreats in Britain.

Not long after I graduated, my sister very suddenly and unexpectedly died. I had been seeing her regularly and she literally passed away just a few hours after my last visit. This was the first time that someone very close to me had died, and it turned out to be a sort of wake-up call. I fully realized that I too could breathe my last at any moment, and I started wondering whether I was really making the best use of my time and energy, of my life. I intensified my practice, went on more retreats and – leading a very simple life and working hard – started saving up money in preparation to once more go and live abroad.

I moved to England in May 1998 and for the rest of the year

I did a string of retreats: study retreats, meditation retreats, and self-retreats. In January 1999 I settled at a study retreat centre where I lived, worked, studied, and meditated for the next three years or so. During this time I also went on several meditation and self-retreats, and I explored a variety of Tibetan-style practices. However, they failed to inspire me in the long run, and I kept returning to the direct and straightforward Satipatthāna mindfulness practices. In spring 2002 I left Britain for Spain in order to practice meditation intensively at a remote forest monastery. I felt a strong sense of urgency to really follow the Buddha's advice to sit under a tree and practise. I built myself a very simple hut in the forest and did just that. The small community of full-time practitioners I joined was mainly into Tibetan practices, but they were quite happy for me to do Satipatthāna in the Theravada tradition.

In the summer of 2003 I undertook a 16 week self-retreat. In preparation (and partly during) this retreat I read a number of scriptures and commentaries connected to Satipatthāna plus some books from the Thai forest traditions. Once a week I went to fetch supplies at a food depot maintained by the support team. Apart from a brief chat with a visitor I did not talk to anyone during the entire period. Such a lot of silence was not easy for the mind to handle and so it soon started to entertain itself. It swung from wild fantasies and imaginations to deep penetrations and recollections – and back again. Long forgotten events, both good and bad, soon floated up into consciousness.

All sorts of repressed memories – going right back to when I was about three – wanted to be looked at, fully digested and understood. I felt a lot of shame and regret but also plenty of



longing and attachment. Among many other weird and wonderful things, I discovered that I was still very much in love with my first girlfriend, that there were still strong emotional ties to that 15 year old girl I had gone out with 30 years earlier. I patiently looked at all these memories and – over the weeks and months – learned to accept and integrate them.

The memories of some events, particularly negative ones, kept coming up again and again. I realized that it was important to distinguish between the actual events (or rather the memories of them) and the feelings and emotions connected with them. Memories cannot be erased but the feelings and emotions can be ‘dissolved’, i.e. by patiently looking at the strong emotions again and again, they slowly lose their strength. In this process it also became clear that I had acted in unwholesome ways because of delusion, and this realization helped me to let go of both guilt and attachment.

Parallel to this purifying process, the mind also went on wild single track explorations and fantasies. At one stage I had for example become absolutely convinced that the only lifestyle worth living was the one of a Buddhist monk – and that I was going to become one immediately after my retreat. Only about three weeks later I had become equally convinced that the monk’s life was a waste of time and that I was going to settle down with a woman to practise and share Dhamma in ‘real’ life. At the end of the retreat I did not know what I wanted anymore, I was simply confused and wondered whether I could believe anything that the mind conjured up.

After this intensive retreat I gave myself a few months to digest it all and then decided to leave Spain and continue my

practice in Myanmar. My first teacher had advised me to do this and now – nearly 17 years later – I felt ready to go and do it. I went to a well-known centre where they teach a strict method of slow movement and constant labelling, and where they practice according to a strict schedule from 4 am to 10 pm. I threw myself wholeheartedly into the practice, and also became a fully ordained monk (bhikkhu).

About four months later I was both mentally and physically totally exhausted. The teacher smiled and told me to take a rest for about 2 weeks. I slept ten or more hours every night and did a lot of writing and reading during that period. Then I started practising fully again. At the time I still tried to convince myself that the method was fine and that I was simply not yet up to it. But then, over the following weeks and months, I saw people half my age go through a similar crisis, some even developed chronic headaches and problems with their vision. This constant pushing of oneself to practise harder and sit longer seemed to make most people stiff, tired, and depressed. Any illusions I still had got completely shattered when a foreign monk lost control over his mental faculties. I was also upset when he was then quickly disrobed and sent back to his native country.

Now I began to really critically look at what we were doing. This super-slow moving had always felt unnatural and seemed really unnecessary; the constant labelling kept you very busy and prevented you from seeing the whole picture; the focus on body and feeling meant that you hardly noticed what was going on in the mind; and this eagerness to always do more and sit longer was really ego-reinforcing. In my understanding, the Buddha's teachings point in the opposite direction. They are not

about controlling and manipulating, they are about letting go of any form or manifestation of greed and hatred, about accepting and seeing things as they are.

It was time to move on, but where to? Luckily, I had heard about a centre where they teach mindfulness meditation with an emphasis on the observation of the mind (*cittānupassanā*). I went to see the teacher there and told him about my doubts and problems. It was like coming home; here was a man who understood exactly what I was talking about. His approach was quite similar in some ways to what I had been doing in Spain. Furthermore, he not only knew a better method, but he was also quite obviously speaking from his own experience.

The first big topic I had to deal with after I had changed monasteries was anger. I was angry with myself for having been so stupid and angry towards anyone who was propagating what I considered harmful practices. Looking at this anger with the right attitude, i.e. an attitude of accepting and just observing, helped me to let go and understand. I realized that once again I had been carried away by greed and ignorance and that I had had to pay the price. In a way I had needed that experience to get me where I was.

Observing anger, in fact observing all mind activities, came so much more natural to me than focussing on body and feelings. This was partly because I had already been doing it for many years before, but also because I now more clearly understood that by observing mind activities we are automatically observing everything that we perceive through our sense doors. What I still had to learn was to do this in a relaxed and receptive way and to do it more continuously throughout the day. It also became

very clear that mind activities were to a large extent ignored and repressed by the method of focussing on body and feelings and of labelling 'thinking, thinking, thinking' whenever there were thoughts.

More than two years have passed since, and I have kept practising both inside and outside the meditation centre. The months outside have given me an opportunity to test my understanding and equanimity and to learn in more challenging situations. The time inside has been helping me to go deeper, to see the more subtle defilements at work, and has also given me time to study and to share Dhamma with other practitioners. What I found particularly helpful in making a smooth transition from life in the meditation centre to the 'outside' world and back again is that we are encouraged to do talking meditation. When you are in silence for weeks or months you cannot improve your communication skills. My communications have become more effective and harmonious, and I have also become a better listener.

Practising mindfulness meditation has gradually but radically changed my life. I tried out various lifestyles in the last twenty years: I moved from leading a 'normal life' with a regular meditation practice to working in a Buddhist study centre to meditating in the forest to living as a Buddhist monk totally dedicated to meditation to my present lifestyle, in which I am fully committed to the practice of Dhamma as a lay person living in a meditation centre – with one foot in the world and the other in the monastery so to speak. What has continuously improved throughout this time is the quality of life and the quality of mind. In my opinion, having a clear purpose in life and being content go together with continuous mindfulness and a balanced mind.

The study and practice of Dhamma has taught me a lot and has also made me realize that there is so much more to learn and understand. This process of understanding and letting go of all those weird and wonderful manifestations of greed, hatred, and delusion at more and more subtle levels is most probably more than a life-time undertaking for nearly everyone of us. It also gives me a sense of urgency; what I do not solve in this lifetime will have to be dealt with in future lives. I feel a sense of responsibility to give my best so that the personality that arises as a result of the kamma of this life will enjoy even better conditions for growth and development than I do. I feel a lot of gratitude to the 'personalities' who helped to create the positive kamma which resulted in 'me' being born into conducive circumstances and with many wholesome 'talents' or 'tendencies'.

I also feel a lot of gratitude to everyone who has helped me grow and develop in this very lifetime. My parents, relatives, teachers, and many friends have all contributed to what – or who – I am today. I particularly value spiritual friendship, the help and companionship of all those I have met and keep meeting on the spiritual path. The hundreds of hours of discussions, of sharing Dhamma, have been – and will continue to be – an essential part of the practice.

The quest for freedom - the practice of Dhamma - has become my life. I have never felt so free, so content, so much at peace as right now. A year ago I would have said the same, and in a year from now I will most probably say the same again. This path of liberation is a never-ending process.